



Al-Risala 1985

November

Editorial

The Twenty Fifth Hour. This somehow takes us into a strange realm far and beyond our neat and comfortable ideas about the twenty fourth hour. At the end of the twenty fourth hour, we happily begin another day. Full of life, hope and promise. As always. But the *Twenty-Fifth Hour*? This is the title of a book which has just been published in France, analyzing world perspectives today. According to its author, this twenty fifth hour is the hour of doom, an hour which could arrive *at any moment*. Why? Because the world is divided into two groups, both of which are committed to the total annihilation of the other. Inevitably this will mean the annihilation of the whole human race. The blind arms race of these two blocs has turned the world into a vast storehouse of lethal weapons and is leading the world to the brink of destruction.

Is human warfare then going to bring upon us the Last Day? The Day of Judgment? We certainly seem to be rushing towards it on a terrifying parallel with the final earthquake with which God will bring this world to an end. The period of trial which God has ordained for man is then to be over and an eternal, perfect world will replace the present one. But only after God's final earthquake. Then will come God's Judgment of all human beings. Then it will be known, with terrifying certainty, whether one is to be sent to paradise or to be consigned for ever to the everlasting flames of hell. The moment is upon us. The twenty-fifth hour, the hour of doom, must be expected at any moment. Each morning we must ask ourselves if we are going to live until the evening. Will there be a single soul who can outlive the final holocaust?

People are rightly apprehensive of nuclear warfare. But what they should most fear is the Last Trump with which God will announce the end of the world. Nuclear war may or may not be a certainty, but the advent of the Qiyamat, or the Final Day is as sure as its consequences are eternal. Eternal bliss will then be the reward for good deeds, while for bad deeds there will be nothing but eternal damnation.

2 November 1985

Putting one's own house in order first

A person asked Abdullah Ibn Masud to give him some advice. "Stay at home," Ibn Masud advised him, "control your tongue, and weep on remembering your sins."

Instant Response

In the developed countries computerized telephone systems have been introduced. As a result modern communications have undergone a transformation. In many towns in the U.S., for instance, a system called “enhanced 911” has been installed. The number 911 has to be dialed in an emergency for the caller to summon help.

With enhanced 911, a telephone company is now able to trace the originating number of the call and the caller’s address instantly even without the caller saying a word. This automatic system can immediately identify and convert numbers into addresses even when the callers are unable to say where they were calling from. The system’s computer is so efficient that after tracing the call it can itself determine whether the emergency relates to the city’s police, fire or ambulance department.

In Orlando, Florida, a panic-stricken woman caller dialed 911 but could not say a word before hanging up. Gunshots, however, were clearly audible. Within minutes cars were on their way to the correct address and the culprit – an enraged gun-toting relative of the woman’s – was apprehended.

In another case, a deaf and dumb person could summon help in similar fashion in an emergency.

(The Times of India, April 16, 1985)

In the above instances, the computer converted the call into telephone numbers, and telephone numbers into addresses, then without delay informed the police by wireless.

The Quran and the Hadith tell us that when a servant calls God he immediately establishes contact with Him. There is no delay either in the calling or in the response.

The computerized telephone contact is a material analogy of this spiritual reality. It shows how a servant, moved by the remembrance of God, loses himself in a spontaneous outburst of feeling, calls upon Him and instantly finds himself very close to him, within a moment he is in touch with his Lord.

3 November 1985

The best thing one can do is say something good

A Muslim can do his brother no greater service than to convey to him something good that he has heard (Jam'i Bayan'ul-'Ilm wa fadhlihi).

Dust unto Dust

Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) started his career as a military officer. By seizing opportunities to distinguish himself when they came his way, he succeeded in attaining the throne of France and had himself proclaimed Emperor of France in 1804. Then he set out to conquer the world. Soon he had conquered the whole of Europe except for England. He married a charming French lady, Josephine, but later divorced her, as she had failed to bear a successor for the Emperor of Europe.

Afterwards, Napoleon married Marie-Louise, daughter of the King of Austria. She bore him a son in 1811 who was named Francis Joseph Charles. Napoleon was happy that he was to be succeeded by a crown prince who would continue the monarchy. Before long, however, his excessive political greed had led him to clash with Russia. Although Russian armies failed to counter him, the Russian climate came to their rescue. Napoleon's armies, not accustomed to that severe winter cold in Russia, could not bear up when the snow started falling. Napoleon was compelled to retreat in such a state of disarray that the major part of his army perished on the way. This occurred in 1812. Later events saw him in greater trouble. With his greatly reduced army he was defeated by Germany at Leipzig in 1813 and abdicated in 1814, when he was exiled to the island of Elba. He escaped and returned to power only to suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of the British at Waterloo in 1815. He was taken captive and was sent off to the island of Saint Helena, where he died in imprisonment in utter desperation in 1821.

Man dreams of glory and splendour not only for himself but also to pass on even to his children, blissfully unaware of the fact that before long he himself is to be divested of all his glory. Each day, in this world, one 'Napoleon' or the other disappears, but no one takes heed.

In the present world, man is offered limited opportunities, man's ambition knows no limits and he plans his life in the most incautious and unrestrained manner. Yet, at the end of it all, personal glory is simply buried in the dust. Those who watch the demise of 'great' men do not learn any lesson from their passing. Everyone sets out to write the same story, blaze the same trails, and climb the same mountains as his predecessors. No one considers that it is all going to end in the same way, and that no trace of glory can pass with one into the hereafter.

One Event: two Results

In the 13th century the Muslims were politically; culturally, academically and scientifically the most advanced people in the world. It was then that Europeans decided to become acquainted with Arabic and Muslim sciences. It was this decision which led to the European Renaissance in the 15th century. By learning and elaborating on Muslim sciences, Europe became strong enough to take over – not only Muslim countries – but the whole world.

Five hundred years after this event, the same situation confronted the Muslims. They saw Europe to be ahead of them in every field – political, cultural, academic and scientific. They were filled with enthusiasm to learn European languages, and became acquainted with western learning. But here the result was quite different. European education has made Muslims the slaves of Europeans. They have forgotten their own identity and have donned European garb.

How is it that one kind of event has produced two different outcomes? The answer to this question lies in the different approaches found in both cases. Europeans learnt Islamic sciences in order to be able to defeat Muslims with the latter's own weapons. Muslims, on the other hand, are becoming acquainted with European knowledge in order to be able to copy Europeans and win their esteem. When there is such a difference of approach there is sure to be a difference in outcome.

For one thousand years, the Muslims enjoyed a status in the world like that of the super-powers today. While Europe was still submerged in the Dark Ages, Arab Muslims had developed a highly advanced civilization. Aided by their own research, and translations of Greek and other books of learning, they were the leading philosophers in the world. Academically and culturally, they were in a class by themselves. The Arabic language enjoyed an unparalleled intellectual status. People used to travel from far and wide to learn Muslim sciences and arts in centres such as Baghdad, Damascus, Cordoba and Granada, in the same way as they travel to the universities of America and Europe today.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, when Muslim power was at its peak, and their empire had expanded beyond Arab countries into France, Europe waged a savage war against the Muslims. This war, popularly known as the Crusades, lasted from 1092 until the end of the 13th century. The outcome was total defeat for Europe.

But Europeans did not lose heart. Instead, they tried a new tack. In the Crusades they had discovered that the Muslims were far ahead of them in science. Imagine, for instance, how the Franks must have felt when the Egyptian army used catapults to rain fiery arrows down on their army. When these arrows were unleashed and soared towards the enemy, they appeared like serpents of fire flying in the sky. They were as horrifying to the Franks – who at that time possessed only old-fashioned hand weapons – as modern missiles would be today were they to stream down on a backward and helpless country. In fact, the

Muslim world was far ahead of Europe in every department of civilization. So, after their bitter experience of the Crusades, Europeans decided that if they were to defeat the Muslims they would have to wage another kind of war: they would have to be equipped with Muslims' skills and defeat them with their own weapons.

European clerics raised the slogan of "Spiritual Crusades". This involved learning Muslim theology, and presenting its history and creeds in such a corrupted form that Muslims would turn against their religion and adopt Christianity. In this way an enemy that could not be defeated on the field of battle would be weakened numerically and eventually overcome. The Christian missionary movement first started at the time of the Crusades; it was indeed a crusader who founded the original missionary organization at Mount Carmel in 1154. The movement was then taken up by the Franciscan order in 1219. It is now the most powerful missionary organization in the world. Its extensive literature has succeeded in spreading false notions about Islam throughout the world.

At the same time, Europeans made a tremendous effort to learn Muslim arts and sciences. The Arabic language found a place in the syllabus of western universities. Books by Muslim scholars were translated into European languages. Students started traveling from Europe to cities in the Islamic world to receive education.

But this new war-technique meant considerable internal conflict in Europe. Reactionary elements were wary of the campaign to popularize the Arabic language. They feared that it would lead to a diffusion of Islamic thought among the people. The Franciscan monk, Roger Bacon, (1214-1294), for instance, was branded as a "Saracen" by his Oxford contemporaries when he stressed the importance of the Arabic language.

But despite this opposition, people became more and more enthusiastic about learning Muslim languages and sciences. Profiting from Muslim research, and adding to it, Europe made incredible advances, setting new standards in every field. Eventually they overcame the Muslims and became the intellectual and practical masters of the world. Modern historians are almost unanimous in agreeing that the real source of the European Renaissance was the learning that reached Europe from the Islamic world. (*Western Civilization*, by Edward Macneil-Brown).

Five hundred years later the historical scene changed. The Muslims, impressed by the progress of western civilization, became eager to acquire western knowledge and skills. But the motive force behind their enthusiasm was quite different from that seen in European history. According to Professor Gibb*, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) a strong supporter of Western style education, was the founder of the first modernist organization in Islam. In 1875 he founded Aligarh College in the United Provinces, India, and devoted the rest of his life to running it. In 1920 it became a full-fledged university. One can gain an idea of his intentions in sponsoring western education from the words of his close colleague, Maulana Hali: "Come on, Hali," he addressed himself in one poem, "let's follow the west now." On his return from England in December 1870, Sir Syed launched a magazine entitled, "*Tahzeeb-ul-Akhlaq*". At the beginning of the first issue, he wrote the following lines:

* A renowned Orientalist and Islamic historian.

Our aim in publishing this magazine is to fill the Muslims of India with enthusiasm for becoming a part of modern civilization, so that the scorn with which civilized nations view them can be eliminated, and they can take their place among the civilized and respected nations of the world.

To Sir Syed, progress lay in Muslim youth becoming majors and colonels in glittering uniforms. His ultimate aim was education which would qualify Muslims for high office. Mahdi Efadi was quite correct when he called Sir Syed's civilization "Anglo-Mohammadan culture".

Kamal Ataturk (1881-1938) was another outstanding "modernist". He went even further than Sir Syed in this matter. His aim in propagating western education and civilization in Turkey is clear from the name of his campaign: he and his colleagues called it "gharb do gharo" which, in Turkish, means "a journey towards the west". People who resisted their attempts to introduce Roman script and make Turks wear European-style hats, were killed in their thousands as if they had rebelled against the state.

The result of these attempts to imitate the west was that these Muslim reformers concentrated all their attention on European languages, civilization and literature. They made no serious effort to introduce science and technology – the real secret of European advance – into the Muslim world. Sir Syed openly opposed technical education, giving priority to what he called "high-level intellectual education", and most supporters of modern education supported his view. Their efforts were directed solely at creating a group of people imbued with the values of western civilization and literature. Only a few years elapsed between Kamal Ataturk's secular revolution and the Russian Bolshevik revolution, the amazing fact is that while Russia has now entered the space-age, Turkey has turned into a mere store-house of western imports.

The spirit which led Europe to acquire Muslims' learning was the desire to adopt their skills and use them to defeat the Muslims. They realized that this was where strength lay at that time, and they used it against their enemy. That was why they did not say that they were following the Muslims; rather they said that they were waging a spiritual crusade against their Saracen enemies. Indeed, they were applying a new technique to turn their failure in the crusades into a success. Then, when their efforts succeeded in giving birth to a new revolution in Europe, they behaved as if they had found their own lost glory: they called the new revolution in Europe the Renaissance – a word which means rebirth. They made it appear as if this was not something they had acquired from others, but Europe's own property which had been refound. Though they had taken their learning from the Muslims, they linked it to the past rather than the present, and said that it had belonged to a European country – namely Greece. But this is not what the Muslims did, even though what Europe gave them was simply an advanced version of what they had bequeathed to Europe. Muslims sought western learning in an attempt to imitate the west, Sir Syed describing his initiative as being "in the footsteps of the west", while Kamal Ataturk called it "a journey towards the west". Since the two went about their respective task in such a different spirit, it was inevitable that Europe should defeat the Muslims with their own knowledge, whereas Muslims just became European puppets with the knowledge they had acquired from the west.

The final target of Kamal Ataturk's movement was to make Turks wear hats and trousers. Sir Syed's

ambition was to make Muslim youth well-versed in European literature. Clearly, no other result could come of their efforts than that which actually emerged.

If history on the one hand tells us what we have done wrong, it also tells us what we should do now: we should do exactly what Europe did with us; we should acquire western learning in order to defeat western civilization, and establish Islam in its place. If we work in this spirit, our efforts are sure to reap success, just as the Europeans' efforts did at our expense.

Computer Caprice

A military maneuver was performed by the American navy in July 1983, off the coast of San Francisco, the whole process being computerized. Unfortunately, what no one could foresee was that during the artillery firing drills the computer would develop some defect. As a result, the direction of the firing was totally reversed. According to the programming the shelling should have been directed at a far-off place in the sea, but due to this reversal, the shells began hitting a Mexican cargo ship instead.

We often come across such news about computers. Why do they go “on the blink” and fail to carry out their orders properly? It is because they are only material machines, totally devoid of brain. Similarly, had the universe been simply a material machine, as is generally held by the atheists of modern times, it could never have functioned so accurately and flawlessly as it does. The earth and all the human settlements on it would have been completely destroyed as if ravaged by earth-quake. In the wake of universal accidents, not only the universe, but also those who audaciously seek to place a material interpretation upon the existence of the universe would have been destroyed altogether.

“There is no creator of the universe, it is but a material machine.” This sentence reads very well, – a good, grammatical sentence. But it loses its value when it is matched with reality. For there is inherent contradiction in these conceptions. This sentence would have been correct if any self-made and self-operated machine had actually existed. But there is no such thing. All the machines we know are made and operated by ‘men’. And they are certainly not free from defects.

Then how is it possible for a flawless workshop to have come into existence by itself and to continue to function so perfectly from time immemorial?

There is Always a Way

You have probably seen manufacturers of glass frames scoring the surfaces of sheets of glass with a pen-like instrument, then neatly snapping them into two. The cutting edge of this tool is made up of small razor-edged diamonds. Even the huge drills used for boring through hundreds of feet of rock strata in the search for oil are fitted with diamond cutting edges. It is the extreme hardness of the diamond which makes these tools so effective. The diamond is, in fact, the hardest known naturally-occurring substance. It cannot even be scratched. Put it in acid, and there will be no effect. But there is another aspect to this wonderful stone. If it is heated to a very high temperature it will disappear – it will simply sublime into carbon dioxide, and if struck a sharp blow at exactly the right point, it will break asunder. You have only to look at diamond gemstones to see what exquisite, multi-faceted forms they can be given by jewelers, because, by studying the inner structure of the diamond, they know exactly where and how to break them.

Similarly, when we find ourselves in difficult situations, we should study them carefully, in the way that the jeweler studies his diamond. We should not approach them, carelessly, from the strongest point, but with circumspection, from the weakest. We should not adopt methods which are likely to gain poor results like aggressiveness or violence, for these only engender bitterness and obstinacy in others. We should resort to politeness and diplomacy – eschew harsh language in favour of gentleness and tact.

We should consider also that there are certain human beings who are known as “rough diamonds.” That is, on the outside they appear to be unattractive and without merit, whereas on the inside they are of great worth. To bring out their worth, so that their true value is apparent to society, it is pointless scratching at the surface or using acid. If the upright human souls is to be revealed in all its beauty it must be given the same delicate handling and treated with the same expertise as the master craftsman lavishes on a superb but fragile piece of jewelry.

10 November 1985

Looking at one's own faults rather than those of others

Rabee' Ibn Khaythima never used to say anything against anyone. Once he expressed his amazement at people who fear God with regard to others' faults, but not with regard to their own.

Compromise and Foresight

When the prophet of Islam and his followers migrated from Mecca to Medina as a result of severe persecution by the Meccans, he was acknowledged by the Medinan converts as the head of the state. But, there was a sizeable proportion of prosperous Jews in Medina who were averse to the rapid spread of the new faith.

In order to avoid a confrontation with them which might lead to their new faith being nipped in the bud, the prophet entered into a treaty in which he accorded the Jewish religion equal status. The treaty specified Judaism for the Jews and Islam for the Muslims. The following were the words of the truce:

1. Muslims and Jews shall live as one people;
2. Each party shall keep to its own faith. Neither shall interfere with that of the other.

This appears rather strange: far from according equal status to other existing faiths, the mission of the prophet of Islam was to bring into predominance the religion which was being revealed to him.

But the prophet was very farseeing. He knew this was a temporary phase. To him, this was Islamic history in the making; even though preaching Islam meant a hard struggle, he felt certain it was going to prevail in the long run. In view of the great potential the future held, the prophet saw that, for the moment, there was wisdom in accepting an inferior position.

A similar situation occurred at the time the peace treaty at Hudaibiyya was being drafted. The prophet agreed to the inclusion of such articles as obviously amounted to acknowledging the superiority of non-Muslims. The parties agreed to maintain peace for ten years on the following conditions:

1. The Muslims should return that year without performing the pilgrimage;
2. Next year they should perform the pilgrimage, but must not stay more than three days at Mecca;
3. They must not take back with them any Muslims then living in Mecca, nor must they stand in the way of anyone of their own number who might wish to remain in Mecca;
4. They must surrender any Meccan going to settle in Medina, but if any of the Medinan Muslims should go to Mecca, the Meccans would not send him back to Medina; and lastly,
5. The Arab tribes will be free to make what alliances they would, with either party.

The prophet, who had been assigned the task of purging Mecca of the presence of all forms of polytheism, did allow himself to be relegated to an inferior position. The highly provocative treaty, considered by all the followers of the prophet as humiliating, could be concluded only because of the

prophet's foresight. He grasped the realities behind the words of the treaty. The prophet was willing to go to any length to de-fuse the existing tension. The state of war was to be ended at any cost. With peace in hand he could devote all his time to preaching and communicating the message of God to his servants. As a result, in the following year, on the occasion of pilgrimage there were ten thousand men with the Prophet instead of the fourteen hundred he had on the occasion of the truce. This increase in the number of Muslims was due to no other cause than the treaty which the Muslims had thought humiliating. The truce of Hudaibiyya, in fact, bridged the gulf that had yawned between Muslims and non-Muslims because of the existence of the state of warfare. Before long, Islam became so powerful that just a show of strength alone was sufficient to conquer Mecca – the city which the prophet had not been allowed to enter even as a pilgrim.

It is interesting to see the modern parallel in the actions of Mr. Jinnah. When it was a question of the form rule was to take in independent India, he advocated a weak centre,

“. . . a loose federation with the centre having limited powers, and residue powers resting with the states. On the other hand, the whole thrust of the nationalist politics of the Congress was in the direction of a strong centre, Jinnah could not have gone along with Congress leaders.”

Indian leaders could not see beyond the words and resolutions of political parties in order to grasp the historical realities which determine the future of a country.

An example of a positive political compromise is that of Hong Kong, a British crown colony, situated on the coast of China's Kwangtung Province – China's "South Gate" – at the mouth of the HSI Chiang Estuary.

It was acquired on a 99-year lease from China, which is due to expire in 1997, and the British government has recently agreed to hand over the country to China. The signing of the treaty followed lengthy negotiations over the past two years involving 24 sittings. Hong Kong will be set free, according to the joint declaration, on 1st of July 1984.

After it is returned to China, the country will retain its freedom of expression; of holding congregations; of calling strikes; of worship; travel and the like. British inhabitants will be entitled to Government jobs. Hong Kong dollar will remain valid although it will no longer bear the photograph of the Queen of England. Thus Hong Kong will become a special administrative region.

In this elaborate treaty it has also been agreed, inter alia, that China will not be entitled to buy shares in Cathay Pacific Airlines, and that the administration in Hong Kong will be run by the Hong Kong people under a chief executive from China.

The colony will thus enjoy a high degree of autonomy. The socialist system and socialist politics shall not be practised – and Hong Kong's previous capitalist system and life-style shall remain unchanged for fifty years. This is a compromise which will obviously benefit everyone concerned.

Let us now take another example which is exactly the opposite of this joint treaty, arrived at peacefully, by mutual agreement.

The Suez Canal in Egypt which connects the Mediterranean and the Red Seas was constructed in 1854-56 by the Suez Canal Company owned by the French. The company had received an Act of Concession from the Viceroy of Egypt, Said Pasha, giving it the right to operate a maritime canal for 99 years after completion of the work. In 1956, however, 13 years before the concession was due to expire, the canal was nationalized by President Jamal Abdul Nasser. The consequences were disastrous. The western powers avenged the attempt at nationalization not only by damaging the canal but also by attacking Egypt, involving themselves indirectly through Israel.

The Egyptians, while gaining an immediate economic advantage, soured relations with innumerable other countries and caused grave disruption in international trade. In the long run, Egypt cannot be said to have been the gainer from such a situation.

It should always be remembered, if we think of the prophet's actions, that it is in no way wrong or demeaning to accept a workable and humane compromise when it is ultimately to bring much richer rewards. Religious priorities, like political expediency, must, before all else, be far-seeing.

Fear not Man. Fear God.

The Quran was revealed gradually over a period of 23 years. Beginning with the word 'read', God instructed man through His prophets in every field in which it was necessary to build up his life. These were things that he would never have learnt by himself.

God continued to send His words of guidance gradually, in stages, till everything that was essential had been imparted, then the book was brought to completion with a long verse. Part of which is given below:

"The unbelievers have this day despaired of your religion.

Have no fear of them: fear Me.

This day I have perfected your religion for you and completed My favour to you. I have chosen Islam to be your faith" (5:3).

Muslims think they have good reason to feel proud on account of this concluding verse; but they have failed to learn the lesson contained therein. Muslims hold their heads high and declare: "Our religion is the only complete religion." But they seldom seek to understand the true meaning of the words revealed, which is "Fear men no longer. Fear God instead." It is explicitly mentioned that when the Muslims confront any problem they should turn only to God, not to men, for the solution to their problems.

Even if their difficulties are created by men, they should seek the help of God. If we turn to God in all things, God will turn to us and answer our prayers.

Since the religion of the Prophet Mohammed was intended by God to be definitive, it was by Him in its entirety, thus preventing all human attempts at distortion of the word of God. If Muslims were to follow it to the letter as is proper, it is absolutely certain that they would then enjoy the protection of God.

Obeying God and His Prophet

Abu Huzaifa had a liking for good food. Having partaken to his heart's content of some delicious food, he once entered the Prophet's company. He was sitting with the Prophet when he inadvertently emitted a belch. The Prophet heard and said: "The most satiated in this world will be the hungriest on the Day of Resurrection." The Prophet's words had such an impact on Abu Huzaifa that he never ate to satiety again.

The Message of the Qur'an

Chapter II (contd.)

"The Jews say that the Christians have nothing to stand upon, and the Christians say it is the Jews who have nothing to stand upon. Yet both read the Scriptures. Even thus speak those who do not know. God will judge their disputes on the Day of Resurrection. Who is more unjust than those who seek to destroy the mosques of God and forbid mention of His name therein? It is not fitting that such men should themselves enter these mosques except in fear. They shall be held to shame in this world and sternly punished in the next. To God belongs the east and the west. Whichever way you turn, there is the face of God. He is Omnipresent and All-Knowing. They say: 'God has begotten a son.' Glory be to Him. His is what the heavens and the earth contain; all things are obedient to Him. Creator of the heavens and the earth. When He decrees a thing, He need only say 'Be' and it is (2:113-117)."

The Jews thought that one had to be attached to saints and prophets to be on the right path. That was why they thought they were in the right and everyone else in the wrong. As for the Christians, they considered themselves unique in that God's "beloved son" had been sent to them. Even the idolaters of Mecca thought of themselves as superior to everyone else, basing their claim on the fact that they were guardians of God's sacred House. Thus every nation had set its own religious standards, according to which they themselves inevitably appeared to be in the right, and everyone else in the wrong. Their actions, however, did not substantiate their claims. For one thing, they had become divided into sects, though all of them swore allegiance to the divine scriptures. They jumped at every opportunity to deny others the right to use places of worship. Though they would say that they were doing this to protect the sanctity of these places, in fact they were ruining them, for places of worship become worthless when people are denied the right to worship there. Everyone should enter into these places in a spirit of humility and trepidation, in consciousness of their own unworthiness rather than the unworthiness of others to join them. One who has such an attitude will never deny the right to do so to those who come to worship; he will never persecute those who come to serve the Lord. When one is truly conscious of God's greatness and one's own helplessness before Him, one's humility will show in one's dealings with others: one will not seek to harm one's fellow-men in any way, let alone deny them their fundamental right to worship God.

Another error into which they fell was to liken God to man. A human being, for instance, cannot be in two places at the same time, and, in consequence, people think that God is also to be found in a certain direction. But God is everywhere. True, he has prescribed a direction for us to face when we worship, but this is just for the sake of practicality; it does not mean that God is to be found in one direction and not in another. Another outcome of this basic misconception of God's nature is people's attribution of a son to Him. But only those who have needs beget sons, and God is immune from all such imperfections

and limitations. He is complete in Himself. Such beliefs do not come from God; man has invented them himself, and whoever makes up his own religion and pretends that it is from God is doomed to disgrace and doom when he comes face to face with his Maker.

“And those who do not know ask: ‘Why does God not speak to us or give us a sign?’ The same demand was made by those before them: their hearts are all alike. But to those whose faith is firm, we have already revealed our signs. We have sent you with truth as a bearer of good tidings and a warner: you shall not be questioned about the people of hell. You will please neither the Christians nor the Jews unless you follow their faith. Say: ‘The guidance of God is the only guidance. And if, after all the knowledge you have been given, you yield to their desires, there shall be none to help or protect you from the wrath of God. Those to whom we have given the Book, and who read it as it ought to be read, truly believe in it; those who deny it shall assuredly be losers (2:118-121).”

All those whom God has sent to preach truth on earth have been confronted with a particular form of reaction. “If you are God’s envoy,” people say to them, “why are you not blessed with great worldly treasures.” These people can only think in worldly terms themselves, so they expect prophets to come up to their materialistic standards. They cannot conceive of someone not endowed with worldly grandeur being God’s messenger. This is the reason the prophets of God have had to face opposition throughout the ages. How, people think, could a great God, whose kingdom extends from the earth to the furthest expanse of the heavens, have chosen such an ordinary person as His messenger? The greatness of God Himself is indeed incorporated in the lives and teachings of His prophets, but in a spiritual, not a material, form. The prophets’ every word and deed is based on truth, and is a manifestation of God’s signs. But such signs cannot be seen, so they do not become a part of the consciousness of materialistic people.

Their minds are moulded in such a manner that they acknowledge only tangible, visible signs of greatness; the invisible, but intensely meaningful signs that God gives His prophets mean nothing to them.

In ancient times the Jews and Christians had been the true followers of divinely revealed religion on earth. When they went into decline, however, their religion took on a communal rather than divine form: piety lay in belonging to their community and impiety in being separate from it; the only criterion between truth and falsehood that they knew was a person’s relation to his own community. This communal, sectarian attitude prevented them from accepting true, unadulterated religion when it came to them. True religion can only be accepted by those who are alive to their true, human natures. Those who have forsaken natural religion for artificial dogmas cannot be expected to respond when they are roused to the call of their own true natures.

Not looking down on one's congregation

The Prophet returned from his journey of Taif seriously wounded, for the people of the town had turned down his invitation to Islam and set the street urchins on him. On the way he took refuge in a vineyard belonging to 'Utba and Shayba, sons of a Meccan noble named Rabi'ya. Both were in the vineyard at the time. Seeing the Prophet's state, they sent him some grapes with their Christian slave 'Addas. The Prophet recited the name of God as he began to eat. 'Addas was astonished, for it was not usual for people in Arabia to take the name of God in this manner. "Where are you from?" the Prophet asked him. "Ninevah," 'Addas replied. "Oh, that was the town of the good man Jonah, son of Matthew," the Prophet observed. "How do you know about Jonah, son of Matthew?" Addas enquired. In reply the Prophet recited that part of the Qur'an which tells the story of Jonah. The Prophet showed 'Addas the utmost deference while preaching the word of God to him. He never used to look down upon his congregation. (Abu Na'eem)

The Moment of Truth

In the present world man believes in God on the basis of argument. In the hereafter he will believe in God on the basis of God's might and power, for He will be visible to all.

It is as if in the present world argument is the representative of God. On the other hand, in the hereafter, God will appear before men in all His glory, then there will be no choice but to believe in Him.

The true believers are those who believe in God on the basis of argument, who bow to truth while there is no other incentive at work. On the contrary, the deniers are those who fail to believe in truth for the sake of truth, who believe in truth only when they have no choice. A truth bereft of power and glory fails to impress itself upon the people. Such men who accept as their object of worship visible might and power and not the invisible God, are not true believers.

God wants to test whether or not people truly believe in the sphere of the unseen, but people want to prove their belief in terms of what can be seen. Thus the true believer is one who sees the world of eternity within the present world. He lives as if the realities of the next, unseen world were present before him. Unbelievers will also see the next world, but this will only be when all veils have been torn asunder by the shrill noise of the trumpet announcing the resurrection of man. Then, all unseen realities will be visible to man. Man's vision will not profit him then on that day. It will be a time of retribution, not a time to give evidence of one's faith in God.

Here man can pretend to be great, but it will not be long before his real position is exposed. On that day many who have honour in this world will be debased, and many who claim to be friends of justice and humanity will be exposed as enemies of the very causes they ostensibly espoused; many who are acclaimed amongst the brave will be condemned as cowards; many who denied bowing to the truth will be exposed as shams; many who thought that they had reserved heaven for themselves will find themselves at the gates of hell. The more fearless of God a man has become, the more fearful the moment which awaits him!

18 November 1985

People are losing just what they want to find

The Prophet said: "How wonderful paradise is. Yet those who seek it have fallen asleep. And how terrible the Fire of Hell is. Yet those who dread it are also asleep."

Broken Pledges

Once a doctor was visited by a stranger who had a box with him. He sat in a corner waiting until all the patients had gone, and the doctor was left alone, then with an air of secrecy he opened up the box in front of the doctor. It contained a gold necklace. The stranger told him that this chain was worth Rs. 10,000 but hastened to add that he did not want to sell it. He only wanted to borrow Rs. 5000 against it. He had run into great difficulties and had felt forced to pawn something valuable. He said that he would be very grateful if the doctor could give him enough money to see him through this emergency. He promised to come back in one month's time and redeem the necklace. The doctor at first said that he was not interested, and refused to give him any money. But the man persisted, explaining his plight in such a piteous way that the doctor softened and agreed to help him out. He handed over the money, then locked the chain in his safe.

Month after month elapsed, but there was no sign of the man returning. The doctor began to feel apprehensive. Then one day he decided to take the jewel out of his safe and send it to the jeweler to have it valued so that he could sell it. To his consternation he was told that it was made of brass. Although the doctor was shocked momentarily, it did not take him long to recover. He said that he had lost his money but that he would not lose his composure. He chose to forget all about this sad incident, and simply took the chain out of his safe and put it in a common almirah, along with other articles made of brass.

This attitude adopted by the doctor is the best solution to many problems that arise from our contacts with other people. Whenever our hopes and trusts have been betrayed we feel that we have genuine grounds for feeling aggrieved. When a supposed man of principle proves a scoundrel, a well-wisher turns out an enemy and a reasonable person shows himself to be quite the reverse, we feel really let down.

On such occasions the best policy is to bring those who have disappointed us down from the high pedestals that we had them on, and put them back among the commonplace. What had formerly been considered 'gold' should then be accepted as being only 'brass' and given a place accordingly. This is the only way to retain one's equanimity in the face of life's many disappointments.

The Importance of Unity

Islam attaches great importance to unity. This is evident in congregational and social matters. But above all it is obligatory in public worship of God. Although prayer in essence is a purely individual affair – the bowing before God of the true worshipper – we are commanded by God to perform this individual and spiritual act in a congregation under the leadership of one man. From this a sense of unity develops, and then, having become manifest, is consolidated according to the will of God.

Zakat (alms-giving) is likewise an individual commandment to set aside a part of one's earnings for the good works of God. What is left to one is deemed sanctified. But one is not meant to disburse this amount at will. From the times of the Caliphate to the present day, these sums have been collected by the government and put into the Public Treasury (Baitul Mal) to provide a common fund not only for the poor, but for a variety of good causes. The sharing of one's legitimately earned wealth with the community is not equivalent to charity:

Zakat is levied under penalty of law, has a definite ratio to wealth and is, in Islam, institutionalized. It is meant for the general welfare of the community and state.

Similarly, fasting is purely an individual and spiritual act. But we have not been asked to fast for one month at just any time of the year. Rather a particular point in the year has been fixed. Muslims are expected to observe and break their fasts in the same month.

Haj is another case in point. Haj means the hastening of God's servants to answer His call. In this respect, Haj also is an individual affair. But this individual act having been made congregational, Muslims from all over the world have to gather at one point at a certain time to perform the rites of Haj together. The pilgrimage then takes place on a vast scale. This collective aspect is predominant in Haj worship. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* has this to say on this subject:

"About 2,000,000 persons perform the Haj each year, and the rite serves as a unifying force in Islam by bringing followers of diverse background together in religious celebration."

(V.IV P. 844, 1984)

Final Destination

The Prophet was entrusted with the mission of proclaiming the call of truth before the people. For this he climbed up the Safa hill and called the Meccan people to come to him. When they had assembled around it, he addressed them thus: "O, people of Quraish", just as you sleep so will you die, just as you wake up so will you be raised up. Afterwards you will either face eternal heaven or eternal hell. On hearing this Abu Lahab rose and said, "Woe to you on this day! Did you assemble us for this?"

When the Prophet entered Medina as the head of the Medinan people, he announced the same truth at the time too. The greatest thing that he had to convey to his listeners was: "O, people, save yourself from hell fire, even if it be by means of a piece of date."

The object of the Islamic Centre is to revive this prophetic mission. People are moved by the problems of life; we have taken up the problems of death. Is there any helper in this mission? People are moved to see the havoc wrought by riots and wars, but is there anyone who will be moved to see the flames of hell fire, and join us in issuing a warning to the people?

People have set their sights on the splendours of the world; we have set our sights on such people who can see the desolation of the grave. There is no dearth of people who are restless because of not having achieved their worldly goals. We require such persons who live in anguish for fear of being refused admission into heaven. People are wailing over worldly loss. We are out in search of such servants of God who have gone crazy for fear of losing out on the eternal world.

All types of activities are going on in this world, but the task which is most desired by God – warning people of the most awesome of days – is being neglected. If men do not rise to this call, God's angel, the Israfil, will make them rise to the call of the trumpet. But Oh! it will not be the time of awakening. For the ungodly, it will be the time of destruction.

Being content with what God has given, and always seeking knowledge.

Abu Qulaba was asked who the richest person was. "The one who is content with what God has given him," was Abu Qulaba's reply. And who is the most knowledgeable? "The one who benefits from the knowledge of others."

Muhammad: The Prophet of Islam

Of the many Arab tribes that embraced Islam after the conquest of Mecca in 8AH, most of them had converted, impressed by the political dominance of Islam, rather than from undergoing any profound intellectual transformation or attaining any such conviction as had driven the earlier followers of the prophet. They had been accustomed to a free and easy life, and some of the Islamic injunctions – especially Zakat* – were more than they could tolerate. Some months before the death of the prophet, demagogues arose in Yemen and Najd who exploited this situation and put forward a new brand of Islam, one in which there was no need to pay Zakat. To give their words more weight these demagogues – notably Aswad and Musailama – laid claim to prophethood, for only then could they throw down a challenge to the Zakat system. Zakat was part of the religion revealed to the prophet Mohammad; they themselves would have to pretend to prophethood in order to speak with the same authority. Their “prophethood” became very popular among the tribes who looked upon Zakat as a burden, and they flocked to these false prophets’ support. Their morale received a boost with the death of the prophet in 10 AH, and apostasy started spreading like wildfire, the only places remaining immune being Mecca, Medina and Taif. There were reports, too, that these rebels were preparing to attack Medina.

* a portion of property bestowed in alms.

One of the tasks that the Prophet performed during his last days was to arrange a force under Usama Ibn Zaid. This army was to attack the Romans on the Syrian front, where previously Usama’s father Zaid had met his death at the hands of the Romans at Mauta. They had just left Medina when news came of the Prophet’s death, so they pitched camp, awaiting orders from his successors. Much as the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, wanted the army to advance, most of the companions were against this. “The Arab tribes are in the throes of revolt,” they said “Medina is liable to be attacked at any time. The army should stay to defend Medina, rather than to be sent to a distant land.” But Abu Bakr was adamant: the army would continue its march on Syria.

All the leading companions were gathered outside Medina under Usama’s command. They had two things on their minds. One was the wisdom of sending an army so far from Medina when the city was under threat of attack. Another was the reservations they had about Usama’s leadership, for he was only seventeen years of age and, worse, was the son of a slave. How, they thought, could great companions of the prophet serve under him, a mere stripling? A seasoned warrior of the Quraish should be appointed in his place.

Umar, who had been with Usama’s army, returned to Medina to convey their message to Abu Bakr. The Caliph listened to what he had to say about the first matter, and replied: “Even if I am the only one remaining in Medina after the departure of the army, and I am left to be devoured by wild beasts, still I cannot recall an army that the Prophet himself has dispatched.” He dismissed the matter of Usama’s youth and rank with these words: “What, are the Muslims still proud and arrogant, as in the time of ignorance?” Saying this, he himself went on foot to send the army on its way under Usama’s command.

With Usama aloft on his mount, the Caliph of the Muslims walked alongside, speaking with him on matters concerning the military campaign. Usama requested Abu Bakr to ride, or let him alight so that they could both walk, but Abu Bakr would agree to neither. He wanted to put an end to the Muslims' misgivings about Usama's leadership, and this was the most practical and effective way of doing it. Their reservations vanished on seeing the Caliph walking alongside Usama's mount.

As news of the advance of Usama's army spread around Arabia, opponents saw it as a sign of the Muslims' confidence. They presumed that the Prophet's followers must have considerable reserve strength to be able to send an army so far from Medina at such a critical time. They decided to await the outcome of the Syrian campaign before attacking the city: if the Muslims met defeat, then they would be sufficiently weakened for an offensive against their capital to be feasible.

Usama Ibn Zaid's army was eminently successful against the Romans. The campaign, which lasted forty days, also proved that Usama was the most suitable person for this expedition. His father had been martyred fighting the Roman army at Mauta, and he was keen for revenge. A large number of captives and great quantities of booty went back with the Muslims to Medina. The rebels lost heart on seeing this, and their revolt was quelled with comparative ease.

So it was that Muslims achieved success on both fronts, simply by doing what the Prophet said.

In the year AH8, the Prophet sent a small squad under the command of Amr Ibn Al-As to the Syrian territory of Zatus Salasil. On reaching that place, Amr Ibn Al-As surveyed the situation. He was dismayed by the enemy's strength, and contacted the Prophet for reinforcements. An additional 100-man force was recruited from the Muhajirs, including Abu Bakr and Umar. Abu Ubaida Ibn Jarrah was put in charge of this party, and they were immediately dispatched to join forces with Amr Ibn Al-As.

When Abu Ubaida Ibn Al-Jarrah reached his destination and joined up with the army of Amr Ibn Al-As, the question arose as to who should take charge of the combined force. Amr Ibn Al-As claimed that the right was his, since he had requested the Prophet for reinforcements and Abu Ubaida's squad had only come in that capacity. But the Muhajirs with Abu Ubaida did not agree. "You can command your force," they said to Amr Ibn Al-As, "and Abu Ubaida will command the Muhajirs." Such a division was not to the liking of Amr Ibn Al-As. He insisted that the Muhajirs were just reinforcements, sent to augment his troops, and that he was their rightful leader. Then Abu Ubaida, hurt at such a state of affairs, spoke up, "I will have you know, Amr," he said, "that the last thing the Prophet did was to make me promise that the two of us would act in unison, without disagreement. Assuredly, even if you do not follow me, I will follow you." Abu Ubaida then handed over the command to Amr Ibn Al-As and agreed to serve under him.

If both men had remained adamant then the matter would never have been solved, and the force which had been sent to combat a powerful enemy would have been exhausted through infighting. Individual assertion of authority at times of disagreement is a source of weakness to the party as a whole, while one individual's submission to the authority of another injects strength into the body of individuals of which he is a part.

(To be continued)